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**Citation for published version:**

Eglinton, J 2017, "'Varia Americana' and race: Kuyper as antagonist and protagonist' Journal of Reformed Theology, vol. 11, no. 1-2, pp. 65 – 80. DOI: 10.1163/15697312-01101016

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1163/15697312-01101016](https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01101016)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Journal of Reformed Theology

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**Title:** *Varia Americana* and race: Kuyper as antagonist and protagonist

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**Word Count:** 6,051 words

**Abstract:**

This article explores the place of African Americans in the account of Abraham Kuyper's 1898 American *séjour* found in his untranslated text *Varia Americana*. Utilizing Wellman's *Portraits of White Racism*, its working definition of racism includes both intentional and unintentional acts that support a prejudicial racial status quo. In that light, Kuyper's text is read as intentionally critiquing American society as racist, whilst also unintentionally furthering the narrative that maintained the racism he wished to condemn. As such, the article aims to prompt more nuanced engagement with the 'deep logic' of Kuyper's thought, in order to aid his later inheritors in their task of reading Kuyper against himself on the topic of race.

**Keywords:**

Kuyper – race – racism – America – neo-Calvinism

**CV:**

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## ***Varia Americana* and race: Kuypers as antagonist and protagonist**

### *1. Introduction: Racism beyond intentionality*

When examining recent trends in debates on race in British public life, it is not hard to find examples of high profile public figures who have been criticized for furthering inherently racist social narratives, albeit without personal intent to cause offence: the actor Benedict Cumberbatch<sup>1</sup> and the sporting benefactor Dave Whelan<sup>2</sup> are prime, although quite distinct, examples of this. In both cases, the figures involved had referred to British ethnic minority persons using terms generally deemed to be racist. In response, both offered public apologies and made plain their lack of intention to offend.

The obvious and difficult question raised by these cases concerns the relationship of intentionality and racism: can racism exist in the absence of intentional prejudice? In that context, David Wellman's seminal work *Portraits of White Racism*<sup>3</sup> makes an important contribution. The core of Wellman's argument is that racism transcends individual intentions. Rather, racism encompasses a host of cultural practices and social institutions that maintain the privileged position of one social group against another. Those cultural practices can include narratives common within a society, as

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<sup>1</sup> Lanre Bakare, "Benedict Cumberbatch apologises after calling black actors 'coloured'," *Guardian*, Monday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015 (<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/jan/26/benedict-cumberbatch-apologises-after-calling-black-actors-coloured>), accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2015.

<sup>2</sup> James Riach, "Dave Whelan: When I was growing up we used to call the Chinese 'chingalings'," *Guardian*, Friday 5<sup>th</sup> December 2014 (<http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/dec/05/dave-whelan-wigan-chinese-chingalings>), accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2015.

<sup>3</sup> David Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

well as linguistic terms (for example, those used to refer to distinct ethnic groups).

Wellman's work called for a broadening of the definition of racism "beyond prejudice to include sentiments that in their consequence, if not in their intent, support the racial status quo."<sup>4</sup>

Post-Wellman, Western approaches to racism have diverged considerably between sociologists and politicians. The former have generally followed Wellman in viewing racism primarily along institutional lines (economics, history and culture), whereas the latter often continue to emphasize individual intention (particularly via the recently created category of 'hate crimes').<sup>5</sup> As the aforementioned examples would suggest, this remains a problematic issue. It is, however, a useful lens through which to view Abraham Kuyper's untranslated text *Varia Americana*,<sup>6</sup> a travel account based on a journey through North America in 1898, in which Kuyper both critiques and can be criticized for racism. As a text that condemns racism, and that can be condemned as racist, *Varia Americana* is undoubtedly among Kuyper's most awkward publications. It places Kuyper's later interpreters in a quandary: should they simply discard the text on the ground of its racist elements? Alternatively, should they utilise the text's anti-racist impulses to counter its obvious racial prejudice? In this instance, can Kuyper be read against Kuyper?

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<sup>4</sup> Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 211.

<sup>5</sup> David Gillbourn and Deborah Youdell, *Rationing Education: Policy, Practice, Reform and Equity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Varia Americana* (Amsterdam: Höveker and Wormser, 1898).

This question lies at the heart of Mouw's efforts to develop an anti-racist 'neo-Kuyperianism'.<sup>7</sup> It is also central to the contributions of scholars who have engaged Kuyper in order to combat racism: Russel Botman,<sup>8</sup> Allan Boesak<sup>9</sup> and Vincent Bacote<sup>10</sup> being perhaps the foremost examples.

This article follows the post-Wellman direction of discourse on race in an attempt to nuance the sense in which Kuyper's comments on African Americans in *Varia Americana* should be viewed as racist, noting particularly the recognition afforded by Wellman that a racial status quo can be preserved or advanced by individuals even when they believe themselves to be working against it. As such, it makes no attempt to defend Kuyper's comments on African Americans. Unintentional racism, after all, is still a form of racism. However, Wellman's pathology of racism is used in an effort to handle Kuyper carefully on this issue. Mapping out the internal dynamics of Kuyper's comments on race in this text is essential if one is to consider whether his own condemnation of racism might be used to condemn or counteract his own furtherance of it.

Numerous previous studies have plotted the connection between Kuyper and the appropriation of his ideas by subsequent racist groups. These range from the more

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<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 80-85.

<sup>8</sup> H. Russel Botman, "Is blood thicker than justice? The legacy of Abraham Kuyper for Southern Africa," in Luis Lugo, *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 342-359.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (New York: Orbis Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

gentle acknowledgement that Kuyper's views on the pluriformity of creation could be inappropriately used to justify racial segregation<sup>11</sup> to Bratt's memorable recognition that aspects of Kuyper's thought proved to be "transportable across a racist grid".<sup>12</sup> However, this article aims to focus directly on race within one of Kuyper's own texts, as a separate issue to the appropriation (whether right or wrong) of Kuyper by later individuals and groups with regard to the same issue.

## *2. Historical Context: Kuyper's Visit to America in 1898*

Kuyper's 1898 visit to North America has been well documented elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Ostensibly, his journey was made to give the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was to receive an honorary doctorate. Perhaps more significantly, however, he also wanted to view first-hand American culture as the ideal context in which to develop and implement his concept of Calvinism, a Christ-centered 'life-system,' and to use the American example of this to further the progress of the anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands.

Three significant publications emerged as a result of this journey: (i) the *Lectures on Calvinism*,<sup>14</sup> (ii) a series of letters to his wife later published under the title *Mijn reis*

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<sup>11</sup> C. Douglas McDonnell, "Racism," in Walter Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 978.

<sup>12</sup> James Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 381.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Bratt, "Kuyper in America," in *Abraham Kuyper*, 261-279.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943).

*was geboden*<sup>15</sup> (and now published in English as *Kuyper in America: "This is where I was meant to be"*),<sup>16</sup> and (iii) *Varia Americana*. A substantial work (191 pages), *Varia Americana* provides Kuyper's observations on America and stands as a counterpart to his later colleague Herman Bavinck's *Mijne reis naar Amerika*.<sup>17</sup> Within the wider context of Kuyper's *oeuvre*, *Varia Americana* is part of a distinct group of writings documenting his travels.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. *Varia Americana* on African Americans

#### (i) *Race in Nineteenth Century Baltimore*

Although Kuyper's comments on African Americans *Varia Americana* are perplexing and contradictory, they are relatively sparse. It is not a text that focuses at length on the African American population or its social place. Far more attention is devoted to the Dutch in America. The relative lack of commentary on the African American population is no doubt reflective of Kuyper's own lack of meaningful encounters with African Americans during his journey. In a letter to his wife, written from Baltimore on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1898, Kuyper notes that he had recently met Warner van Norden (the millionaire President of the National Bank of North America), and President

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<sup>15</sup> Abraham Kuyper, George Harinck (ed.), *Mijn reis was geboden: Abraham Kuypers Amerikaanse tournee* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Abraham Kuyper, George Harinck (ed.), *Kuyper in America: "This is where I was meant to be"* (Sioux City: Dordt College Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Herman Bavinck, George Harinck (ed.), *Mijne reis naar Amerika* (Barneveld: Uitgeverij de Vuurbaak, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Om de oude wereldzee* 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Van Holkema & Warendorf, 1908); *Palestina Het Heilige Land* (Kampen: Kok, 1925).

William McKinley.<sup>19</sup> Following this, he recounts his journey to Baltimore, where his plans were to have “lunch with an immensely rich man at his summer residence, then a visit to a negro family, and then tomorrow morning to [go to] Philadelphia.”<sup>20</sup>

*The Baltimore American*, on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1898, recorded Kuyper’s visit to the home of Lazarus Maddox on that day.

[Kuyper] is also intensely anxious to learn about the true condition of the American negro. To further this end in this respect he was taken to the house of a certain Lazarus Maddox, in Princess Anne. He went into the dwelling and attempted to question Lazarus, who is one of the genuine old-time plantation darkies, about his family life. The colored man was too impressed with the evident importance of his visitor to give a rational account to him, and spent more of the time in bowing and scraping and showing a splendid set of teeth than in telling the Doctor anything that would make good material for a book or a scientific lecture.<sup>21</sup>

For all this apparent anxiety to familiarize himself with the social conditions of the African American population, Kuyper’s own account of his time in America does not indicate any other meaningful interactions with African Americans. The sole black voice listened to by Kuyper, it seems, was that of an ‘old time plantation darkie’ who

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<sup>19</sup> Kuyper, *Mijn reis was geboden*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Kuyper, *Mijn reis was geboden*, 70. “Dan weer lunch bij een schatrijke man op zijn buitenplaats. Nog een bezoek bij een negerfamilie. En dan morgenavond naar Philadelphia.”

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Kuyper, *Mijn reis was geboden*, 70, footnote 171.



offered him little by way of constructive engagement. This is regrettable, given that Baltimore was a majority African American city.

It is noteworthy that his interaction with Maddox took place specifically in late nineteenth century Baltimore. The backdrop to Kuyper's comments on African Americans was a city that had grown exponentially across the nineteenth century on the back of abundant but poorly paid manual labor. In the early nineteenth century enslaved persons were brought to Baltimore to provide cheap labor, which, in turn, eventually drew a large movement of formerly enslaved persons also in search of work. The extreme low cost of using enslaved labor ensured that the wages available to formerly enslaved workers remained low. These conditions remained in Baltimore after the end of slavery, the result of which being generations of African Americans living in precarious socioeconomic circumstances.

The title of Rockman's seminal work on the socioeconomic conditions faced by African Americans in nineteenth century Baltimore, *Scraping By*, is apt in this regard.<sup>22</sup> Lazarus Maddox's life, that of a former plantation worker, would have been, "a hand to mouth existence characterized by minimal control over [his] own labor, periodic spells of joblessness, and severe privation."<sup>23</sup>

Beyond this (socially awkward) direct encounter with an elderly former plantation worker in a large, economically impoverished majority African American city, it

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<sup>22</sup> Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2009). For the socioeconomic conditions of African Americans in twentieth century Baltimore, see Andor Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Rockman, *Scraping By*, 2.

would appear that Kuyper's comments on African Americans were largely based on things heard during his engagements with white Americans. (The particular challenge presented in reading Kuyper in that light, of course, is that white American commentary on the African American population at that time ranged widely from progressive to outright racist.)<sup>24</sup> In that regard, the contrast between his meetings with President McKinley and Lazarus Maddox is striking. *Varia Americana* is very much an account of American society from the top down.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the social actors upon whom it centers are overwhelmingly white, though not exclusively male.

(ii) *Physical and Socioeconomic Factors*

Regarding these comments, Kuyper's observations on African Americans are preceded by observations on the white American population. They are presented as industrious, keen workers whose physical stature reflects their honest labor. In comparison to Europeans, white Americans "slouch less. Physically, they look better. They have a more intelligent eye. Their posture is prouder and freer."<sup>26</sup> Following this, he moves to describe African Americans. "It is worth the effort to visit them in their houses, both those of lower standing and those more developed descendants of

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<sup>24</sup> Fuke's work has demonstrated the range of opinions found in newspapers in the Baltimore area in the years following emancipation. See Richard Paul Fuke, *Imperfect Equality: African Americans and the confines of white racial attitudes in post-emancipation Maryland* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1999), 1-8.

<sup>25</sup> In this regard, *Varia Americana* stands in stark contrast to Bavinck's *Mijne reis naar Amerika*, which is intentional in trying to understand American society from the bottom up ('*van den bodem*'). See Bavinck, *Mijne reis naar Amerika*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 8. "Ze zijn minder afgesloofd. Ze zien er fysiek beter uit. Hun oog is intelligenter. Hun houding fierder en vrijer."

those who so recently were slaves.”<sup>27</sup> With that, Kuyper embarks on a description of African Americans that is intended as a lamentation of their situation and an explanation of the racial prejudice that has put them in this position:

Now, the evil consequences of harsh slavery can be seen here. With the poor, you still generally have a slave-like way of carrying themselves, a half-creeping manner, an almost suspicious spirit. And with the few who have climbed to a higher social position, you find the inflated, blown up style of the ‘*parvenu*’, the false taste of the dandy, the annoying overconfidence of the man who dares to stand up.<sup>28</sup>

The contrast with white Americans is striking. It ties together the visual with the moral: the white posture, produced by honest hard work, is upright and healthy; the black posture, produced by the indignity of enslavement, is suspicious and remains slave-like. Even those African Americans who have escaped the cycle of poverty are given harsh critique: they are ostentatious *parvenus*; they are ‘new money’.

On this specific point, the reader is left to assume that Kuyper is simply recounting opinions heard elsewhere. Lazarus Maddox was certainly not a man of wealth, and census records from Maryland from this period would suggest that only a tiny fraction

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<sup>27</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 9. “Het loonde de moeite, ook met die negerbevolking nader kennis te maken, en hen op te zoeken in hun huizen, ten einde zoowel met de lager staande, als met de meer ontwikkelde afstammelingen van wie nog zoo kort geleden slaven waren, kennis te maken.”

<sup>28</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 9. “Terstond viel hierbij de booze nawerking van de harde slavernij in het oog. Gemeenlijk nog de slaafsche houding, half kruipende manieren, een schier sluipende geest bij de armeren ; en bij die weinigen die social hooger waren geklommen, de opgeblazenheid van den *parvenu*, de valsche smaak van den pronker, de hinderlijke overmoed van den man die trotseeren kan.”

of African Americans there held even lower level middle class jobs.<sup>29</sup> A careful reading of Kuyper here, however, should make clear that his criticism of wealthy African Americans is, by *intention* at least, focused on culture rather than skin color. In this particular instance, Kuyper's critique is not aimed at these (hypothetical?) people because of their color.<sup>30</sup> Rather, to judge the *parvenu* is to identify oneself as 'old money'. It is the assertion of an elitist social identity, and the affirmation that one's own preferable place in the socioeconomic status quo is well established. Kuyper elsewhere offers similarly scathing remarks on the white European *parvenu*.<sup>31</sup> And as such, it is hard to deny that Kuyper would pass the same judgment on white Americans who had recently become rich, but who, to Kuyper's taste, did not thus carry themselves appropriately.<sup>32</sup>

### (iii) *African American Religion and Morality*

Kuyper then discusses African American religion.

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<sup>29</sup> Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Bratt's claim that for Kuyper, race was a matter "not of body but of collective soul." Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 329.

<sup>31</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, tr. J.H. de Vries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 109. "The *Edelreis* everywhere offends the *Wildling*, not merely in that measure and sense in which a finely cultured, aesthetically developed person offends the parvenu; for with these the difference is a matter of degree, so that as a rule the parvenu envies the aristocrat, and so secretly recognizes his higher worth".

<sup>32</sup> A clear implication of Wellman's work is that Kuyper's willingness to apply the same judgment to black and white *parvenus* does not necessarily free him from the promotion of racism. The core of this judgment is that the aristocracy possesses a "higher worth" (*Sacred Theology*, 109) than the lower social classes who, even should they acquire equal monetary wealth, can never truly join their ranks. A Wellmanian reading of this might suggest that such a social institution perpetuates the place of an closed, wealthy, white sub-culture as the most privileged part of a society.

Nonetheless, this negro population is usually very religious. They value decisiveness and are therefore strongly orthodox. They prefer to have their own churches, never attended by white people, and are satisfied if they have a preacher of their own race.<sup>33</sup>

He portrays these churches as exciting and lively places, implying their contrast with the dullness of Dutch Reformed churches in noting that African American preachers never have to deal with congregants who fall asleep during their sermons. Following this, however, he argues that this widespread lively religiosity has not conferred significant moral benefits to the African American population.

These colored people were unaccustomed to any concept of property during their slavery... The commandment, “Thou shalt not steal” thus has a far more limited meaning for them, than for their white compatriots. They like the idea of ‘speaking the truth,’ but the consequences of the old slavery do not yet allow the concept of truth to spread itself out broadly. The same is true with chastity. The scandalous circumstances of the old days, when the slave owners regarded each beautiful young girl as fair game, and paired up their females slaves with male slave after male slave according to their own whim, has destroyed all strenuous attitudes regarding the moral life. And that atavistic evil can only be removed very slowly.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 9. “Desniettemin is deze negerbevolking in den regel zeer godsdienstig. Ze heeft behoefte aan beslistheid en is daarom streng orthodox. Liefst houdt ze er eigen kerken op na, waar geen blanke komt, en voldaan is ze eerst, als ze een prediker bezit van het eigen ras.”

<sup>34</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 10. “Deze kleurlingen waren in hun slavernij aan geen begrip van eigendom gewend, en groeien niet dan langzaam in dit besef in. Het gebod: “Gij zult niet stelen” heeft daardoor voor hen nog veel beperkter beteekenis, dan bij hun blanke landgenooten. Het “waarheid-

At this point, the paradoxical and awkward nature of *Varia Americana* on race becomes painfully clear. This can be seen in the tension between two impulses in this text that are distinct to Kuyper: *description* and *condemnation*. According to Kuyper, African Americans carry themselves like slaves, look suspicious, are very religious but nonetheless have lesser standards of personal property than white people (which is to say, black people steal), and they are sexually immoral. Kuyper offers this as description. His condemnation, however, is reserved for those who enslaved their ancestors: by robbing people of basic freedoms (in this case focused on their ability to self-regulate in social relationships regarding sexual behavior and property), their captors render their descendants' cultures dysfunctional in these regards. Kuyper offers nothing by way of a solution to white guilt, but he does assert this guilt clearly.

(iv) *The Lynch Right*

The final race-related issue handled by Kuyper concerns African Americans and the justice system.

Only from this does the inhuman Lynch Right, which is relentlessly applied by the whites on a negro who violates a white woman, assert itself. It is

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spreken” vinden ze wel schoon, maar de nawerking van de oude slavernij gedooft nog niet, dat het waarheidsbegrip zijn grenzen breed uitzet. En evenzoo staat het met de kuisheid. De schandelijke toestanden van weleer, toen de slavenhouders elk bevallig jong meisje als goeden prijs beschouwden, en hun slavinnen koppelden aan slaaf na slaaf naar hun goed dacht, heeft alle strengere opvatting van het zedelijke leven te niet gedaan ; en niet dan zeer langzaam gelukt het, om dat atavistisch kwaad uit te roeien.”

interesting that the black women complain most earnestly, not about the brutality of the white men who want to have sex with them, but almost only about the lynch mobs. It seemed an insult to her, that the black man, who sleeps with a white woman is thrown outside of the bound of the law, but the white men who do the same to them walk free.<sup>35</sup>

In *The Reformation of Rights*, John Witte describes Kuyper's comments on the success of the American experiment as 'strangely silent' on its failings for numerous oppressed and minority groups, but does include in a footnote that, "In *Varia Americana*... Kuyper did criticize briefly the impoverishment and lynching of blacks".<sup>36</sup> Although Witte is correct in highlighting Kuyper's rose-tinted view of America (which Witte ascribes to Kuyper's desire to flatter his white American audience),<sup>37</sup> a close reading of the text perhaps suggests that Kuyper's criticism is more than fleeting or underwhelming. In context, Kuyper describes the 'barbaric' or 'inhuman' Lynch Right ('het wrede Lynch-recht') as a racist white reaction to inter-racial sexual relations, and highlights the practice of lynching as an example of how relationships between American whites and blacks are characterized by deep hatred.

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<sup>35</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 11. "Alleen daaruit verklaart zich het wreede Lynch-recht, dat onverbiddelijk door de blanken op een neger, die zich aan een blanke vrouw vergrijpt, wordt toegepast. En nu is het opmerkelijk, dat de negerinnen zich het ernstigst beklagden, niet over de vrijpostigheid van den blanken wellusteling, maar schier uitsluitend over dat Lynchen. Het scheen haar een belediging, dat de neger, die zich aan de blanke vrouw vergrijpt, buiten de wet wordt gesteld, en dat wie haar zelve aanrandt, vrijloopt."

<sup>36</sup> John Witte, *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 325, footnote 11.

<sup>37</sup> Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 325.

Especially on this point is the reciprocal hatred between negroes and whites so strong, that when the negro editor of a newspaper dared to write that white women even sometimes seek sinful relationships [extra-marital] with negroes, the whole white population tore up the next morning at his office with pistols and guns, shot two men dead, and burned down the entire place.<sup>38</sup>

Here, Kuyper is referring to retaliation after an article in the *Daily Record*, a local paper from Wilmington, North Carolina with an African American readership, from 18<sup>th</sup> August 1898. This article stated, “[O]ur experience among poor white people in the country teaches us that women of that race are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men than white men with the colored women.”<sup>39</sup>

Kuyper’s impression was of a dysfunctional society profoundly marked by racially focused hatred and violence. That Kuyper focuses on this hatred as seen particularly when inter-racial relationships are concerned should be read against the backdrop of Kuyper’s own positive views of inter-ethnic relationships.<sup>40</sup> Although it has been argued elsewhere that the motivations for Kuyper’s public support of inter-racial marriage were founded on a paternalistic, Euro-centric cultural imperialism,<sup>41</sup> his clear condemnation of lynching as a response to the ‘commingling of blood’ should

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<sup>38</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 11. “Voor al op dit punt is de wederzijdsche haat tusschen negers en blanken da nook zoo sterk, dat toen een neger-redacteur in zijn blad had durven schrijven, dat de blanke vrouwen zelve soms zondige relatien zochten, den volgenden morgen heel de blanke bevolking met pistolen en geweren op zijn bureel lostrok, er twee man doodschoot, en heel het huis in den brand stak.”

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Kuyper, *Mijn reis was geboden*, 83, footnote 14.

<sup>40</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 35-36.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction*, 81-82.



be read in light of his advocacy of inter-racial relationships (albeit within the context of marriage between those of shared Christian culture).

(v) *Kuyper's Conclusion*

Kuyper's closing comments in this section of *Varia Americana* are as follows:

Is it now not understandable that the workman of the Aryan race compares favorably against the dark shadow that continues to rest on the negro population? Although it is still doubtless true that now, some eminent men have come forth from negro circles, and that more than one of the normal negroes has come to a nobler mind. As for the majority, though, the negro population lacks skill and pride and character, and it is not least through the contrast with this abhorrent self-degradation that the white workman, out of *self-respect*, is prompted to act more nobly and to occupy a better social position.<sup>42</sup>

While this article offers no defense of the racist elements in *Varia Americana*, it does aim to read the text carefully in order to locate the aforesaid elements accurately.

Accordingly, Kuyper's use of the term 'Aryan race' will no doubt make contemporary

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<sup>42</sup> Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 11-12. "Is het nu niet te verstaan, dat juist tegenover de donkere schaduw, die nog op deze negerbevolking rust, de workman van het Arische ras gunstig afsteekt? Al is het toch ongetwijfeld waar, dat nu reeds uit de kringen der negers enkele eminente mannen zijn voortgekomen, en dat meer dan één ook onder de gewone negers tot nobeler zin is opgeklommen; voor wat de groote massa betreft, mist de negerbevolking én kunde én fierheid én karakter; en het is niet het minst door de tegenstelling met deze weezinwekkende zelf-verlaging, dat de blanke workman, uit *selfrespect*, geprikkeld word om edeler op te treden en zich beter sociale positive te veroveren."

readers uncomfortable by virtue of its twentieth century associations with Nazism. It is important, however, to read *Varia Americana* as a nineteenth century text, and as such to avoid reading this section anachronistically. It is fairly well established that Kuyper's subscription to nineteenth century European race theory was 'full blown.'<sup>43</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Kuyper's views on race in relation to linguistics also make this plain to a disappointing extent.<sup>44</sup> That said, this particular term should be critiqued as a demonstration of nineteenth, rather than twentieth, century racial prejudice.

Furthermore, this section is framed by Kuyper as observation. It offers no tacit approval of the racial status quo encountered during his American *séjour*. Rather, it is his description of a dysfunctional society produced by enforced slavery: its 'evil consequences' center on the creation of a population caught in 'abhorrent self-degradation,' and subjected to the 'relentless application' of the 'inhuman Lynch Right.' It seems hardly surprising to Kuyper that whites advance more easily in American culture than their black neighbors.

#### *4. Critique of racism and critique as racist?*

Clearly, *Varia Americana* is a hard text to read. In his albeit limited comments on African Americans, Kuyper believes himself to be offering criticism of the racially

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<sup>43</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 293.

<sup>44</sup> James Eglinton, "From Babel to Pentecost via Paris and Amsterdam: Multilingualism in neo-Calvinist and Revolutionary Thought," in James Eglinton and George Harinck, eds., *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution* (London and New York: T&T Clark/Continuum), 49.

prejudiced culture that perpetuates their disadvantage. And yet the text is also riddled with examples of Kuyper's own furthering of racial prejudice.

(i) *Critique of racism*

The particular critique offered by Kuyper is historically interesting: his description of the particular plight of the African American population is centered on its coerced enslavement. The entire description develops in Kuyper's identification of the 'evil consequences of harsh slavery.' In context, this was not a view shared by all late nineteenth century white Americans. Rather, the oppressive circumstances faced by the African American population at that time were often attributed to their emancipation, rather than their enslavement. Perhaps typically of this era, the *Maryland Farmer and Mechanic* contained a series of articles in 1866 arguing that the African American plight stemmed from their newfound freedom from slavery.

The negro (half-crazed by the change...in his status) will not – with rare exceptions – settle down to a regular and systematic course of industry... [L]iberty has so demoralized the race that they have become a nuisance, and a 'stench in the nostrils of our people,' and should be got rid of as quickly as possible.<sup>45</sup>

Such views, of course, were not restricted to provincial publications. They were commonplace among white American politicians.<sup>46</sup> The Southern Presbyterian Robert

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<sup>45</sup> Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Amongst various examples cited by Fuke are speeches by the Democrat Oden Bowie on emancipation as "greatly unsettling and demoralizing... That hitherto useful and contented class of

Lewis Dabney was a noted theological advocate of the claim that emancipation would create the picture described by Kuyper. In an 1840 letter, Dabney wrote, “I cannot conceive of any duty arising from the command to love thy neighbor as myself which compels me to inflict a ruinous injury on that neighbour, and such would be immediate freedom to the slave.”<sup>47</sup> Although Dabney’s views should not be conflated with those of the columnists in the *Maryland Farmer and Mechanic*, the core notion is the same: the abolition of slavery, rather than its institution, would curse the African American population.

Viewed in that context, Kuyper’s line of thought clearly takes a stand against the then popular white American tendency to blame emancipation, rather than enslavement, for the picture described in *Varia Americana*. This should be acknowledged by works on Kuyper on race.

(ii) *Critique as racist*

However, despite this, *Varia Americana* contains various strands that strike the contemporary reader as promoting racial prejudice and maintaining the very status quo that Kuyper critiqued.

Despite his intent to describe rather than judge, Kuyper’s observations on African Americans in *Varia Americana* are nonetheless guilty of crude racial stereotyping.

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labor... The black man... is admirably fitted for the servile condition which for two centuries he has so advantageously occupied in this country.” Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> R.L. Dabney to G. Woodson Payne, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1840, in Thomas Cary Johnson, ed., *Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 68.

There is a striking difference between the nuance with which Kuyper describes the blended ethnic and cultural backgrounds of white Europeans, and his tendency simply to write of ‘black’ as a generalized pan-African ethnic and cultural identity. Other texts show that Kuyper was not ignorant of African cultural and ethnic diversity,<sup>48</sup> but *Varia Americana* does little to convey this.

In writing of ‘black’ and ‘white’ as generalized groups, particularly where the former is described negatively and the latter positively, Kuyper’s text sustains the social narrative that he is trying to critique. Stated otherwise, it is hard to foresee how African Americans can flourish when even their apparent defenders homogenize them (albeit whilst allowing for exceptional cases) and describe them *en masse* as suspicious-looking thieves, liars and sexual deviants. Regardless of whether enslavement (according to Kuyper) or emancipation (according to Dabney) is to blame for this, the same narrative is perpetuated: white Americans should be suspicious of their African American neighbors.

A Wellmanian reading might suggest that leaving such a narrative unchallenged is integral to maintaining the culture of hatred described by Kuyper in *Varia Americana*. Further to this, the role it plays in maintaining the racial status quo creates a dangerous existence for the party stereotyped negatively by it. The narrative places

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<sup>48</sup> In “The South African Crisis,” Kuyper distinguished between the ‘Hottentots’ and the ‘Bantus’. Both of these are, of course, reductionist labels: Bantu refers to an entire civilisation spanning hundreds of distinct ethnic groups who speak Bantu languages; Hottentot refers to the Khoisan, a unifying name given to two groups of ancient Southern African peoples. Kuyper was critical of their particular cultures, which he believed to be inferior to the Christian cultures of the Western world. Abraham Kuyper, “The South African Crisis,” in James Bratt (ed.), *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 329.

one privileged ethnic group at the center, whilst pushing another ethnic group to the periphery. This group is kept there by the prejudice cultivated in the central group, which is taught to generalize its peripheral neighbor as suspicious, dishonest, immoral and so on. In turn, this creates a culture of fear-based interactions. To move to the present day, this narrative causes African American men to fear for their lives when pulled over by white police officers. Fear-based racial profiling comes at a grave human cost.

#### *4. What can be done with *Varia Americana*?*

In a sense, *Varia Americana* is 'Kuyper and race' in a microcosm. In one text he manages to fall on both the right and wrong sides of history, leaving his later inheritors with the considerable challenge of rescuing Kuyper from himself. At the outset, this article pointed to the likes of Mouw, Botman, Boesak and Bacote, who have or are currently trying to do this. What, then, does an exploration of race in *Varia Americana* have to contribute to their efforts?

Clearly, there is a certain inadequacy in simply naming Kuyper a racist without offering any explanation of the particular sense in which he supports or furthers racial prejudice in *Varia Americana*. Wellman's work requires us to act with greater specificity. The pathology of racial prejudice in this text takes a particular shape: it is not found in Kuyper's assertion of white guilt and criticisms of the effects of enslavement, but rather it lies in the relaying of crude, negative stereotypes about African Americans, the culture of fear this creates, and its eventual human cost.

This dilemma, of course, is not unique to Kuyper's inheritors. Calvin's theological followers face a similar issue (albeit regarding human rights, rather than the specific issue of race) concerning his support for the execution of the heretic Michael Servetus: can contemporary Calvinists use Calvin's own theology to condemn Calvin's support of the execution of a man whose crime was the denial of the Trinity? Similarly, Barth scholars have asked whether fundamental aspects of Barth's thought might be used to counteract his perceived lack of support for the Jews in his theological writings against the Nazis. In that context, Eberhard Busch's *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933-1945*<sup>49</sup> has argued that the deep logic of Barth's thought (focused on the particular nuances of Barth's Christology and doctrine of election) creates a stronger impulse to support the Jews than to neglect them.

Might a similar approach prove fruitful for Kuyper's later readers? Identifying an equivalent 'deep logic' in Kuyper's thought, of course, presents some challenge. There are many instances of the facile handling of Kuyper's theology reducing it to a 'no square inch' soundbite. As has already been noted, there are other examples of his thought being 'transported across a racist grid', leaving us to deal with contextualized appropriations of (elements of) Kuyper's thought, rather than with Kuyper's thought itself. Attempts to trace out something akin to Barth's 'deep logic' (as identified by Busch) are less commonplace, de Bruijne's recent work being one of the few recent examples moving towards this.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933-1945* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> Ad de Bruijne, "'Colony of Heaven': Abraham Kuyper's Ecclesiology in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 445-490.

An attempt to develop an account of Kuyper's 'deep logic' falls far beyond the scope of this article, which serves rather as a call to Kuyper scholars to develop a richer, more nuanced understanding of his complex, often diverging, and intensely biographical theological vision. Such accounts would serve as better foundations upon which to base this investigation. They would enable us to ask; which deeply seated aspects of Kuyper's theological vision led him to call enslavement a 'harsh' practice bringing 'evil consequences', and the Lynch Right 'inhuman'? Which of these aspects led him to diverge from Dabney in focusing on enslavement rather than emancipation as the genesis of these 'evil consequences'? And having identified these aspects, it must be asked: can they be used to reform Kuyper's views on race more fully, in order that a Kuyperian narrative on race would no longer 'include sentiments that in their consequence, if not in their intent, support the racial status quo'?<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 211.